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# WEBS OF INTERACTION: A PHILOSOPHY OF STATECRAFT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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**Webs of Interaction: A Philosophy of Statecraft for the 21st Century**

The most important challenge facing the foreign policy strategist, as Chester A. Crocker admonishes us, is to ***get the major world trends right***. Only then is it possible to build an effective foreign policy, one in which power in all its forms is tied to an overarching strategic framework, and then translated into action by creative diplomacy. [1] Since the end of Cold War in 1991, the debate among national security strategists and scholars in the Realist and Liberal traditions demonstrates just how difficult a task it is to simply get the trends right: they seek to either fit the trends into an existing framework or slightly modify the framework to adapt to new realities. For example, three assumptions continue to define the realist view. First, realists regard states as the dominant actors in world politics. Second, realists assume that force is a usable and effective instrument of policy. Third, realists assume a hierarchy of issues in world politics, in which the high politics of military security dominates the low politics of economic and social affairs.[2] Liberalism, on the other hand, is based on the premise that cooperation among states is not only possible but necessary. They emphasize not so much the distribution of power among the major actors but the economic, technological and political interdependence among states, especially the industrialized nations. The gains to be achieved in an interdependent world are seen as far surpassing gains achieved through adversarial

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[1] Chester A. Crocker, "Contemporary Challenges for the Foreign Policy Strategist," Inaugural Lectures, James R. Schlesinger Program in Strategic Studies, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1998), 2-3.

[2] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "An Interdependent World", in Theories of International Relations, (Wahington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1990) 229-230.

relationships. Thus, the liberal view holds that war and conflict must be ruled out as instruments of policy.[3]

While realists and liberals hold fundamentally different world views, there is one area in which they both agree: the interactions among states in the post-Cold War world will be extremely complex. It is this complexity which defies attempts by realists and liberals to simply make the world fit into existing paradigms and frameworks. The purpose of this essay is to introduce the concept of *Webs of Interaction* as an organizing framework for understanding the post-Cold War environment and examine the strategic implications of this framework as an alternative to existing realist and liberal paradigms.

## *The Post-Cold War Environment--Getting the Trends Right*

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 marked the end of the Cold War, and left the United States holding a suddenly obsolete national strategy of Containment that had governed U.S. foreign policy for four decades. Almost overnight, the world awakened to a post-Cold War environment with only one superpower in what had been a bipolar security framework. Gone was the predictability of the Cold War. According to Claude Ake:

> allies and opponents were easily identified and generally understood. There were specific power centres (sic) to focus on; there were grand ideologies which

[3] Mohammed Ayoob, "Subaltern Realism: International Relations Theory Meets the Third World," in International Relations Theory and the Third World (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) 36.

readily ready-made suggested how to interpret events and how to proceed, and there were allies to mobilize and tested modalities of struggle to utilize.[4]

Similarly, Samuel P. Huntington observes that the overriding U.S. national purpose during the Cold War was to contain and defeat communism. For 40 years virtually all the great American initiatives in foreign policy -- the Marshall Plan, NATO, the Korean War, support for Israel, the Viet Nam War, foreign aid -- centered on establishing democratic footholds to counter moves by the Soviets.[5] Economics, while vital on the domestic front, was less a tool of statecraft than a resource to enable the U.S. and Soviet Union to further competition in, and back up commitments to expand, their respective nuclear and conventional armed forces.

Thus at the dawn of the 21st Century, the leading industrialized powers are no longer circumscribed by a contest of wills between superpowers whose principle aim is to challenge, check, and check-mate each another as in a chess match. The new contest is more like the game Monopoly, in which multiple players pursue opportunities for expanding their markets share in the global economy using a wide variety of political, diplomatic, economic, and even military tools. The new strategic environment also poses new and dangerous threats: terrorists wielding weapons of mass destruction (WMD; catastrophic attacks on information systems and networks; collapse of financial markets; ecological disasters, the spread of viruses that attack the immune systems of animals and humans; international drug trade; uncontrolled immigration; hunger and poverty; human

[4] Claude Ake, "The Shrinking Democratic Space," in Future Multilateralism (New York: United Nations University Press,1999) 183.

rights abuses; and civil disturbances and civil wars producing failed states. In the new strategic environment, the opportunities are immense, despite the existence of major threats, costs, and risks. It is also clear that both the challenges and the opportunities are well beyond the capacity of any one state to deal with effectively. According to W. Andy Knight, new paradigms in strategic thinking are emerging to address these challenges and opportunities more effectively:

> The straightjacket imposed on our thinking by neo-realist, liberal institutionalist and Marxixt theories, which led us to conceive of international relations and governance of the globe in mostly statist terms, is being shed as a number of new paradigms emerge. [There] appears to be a movement towards a post-Cold War global agenda that privileges items such as demilitarization, democratization, sustainable development, environmental protection, cultural pluralism and other civilizational issues, human rights and justice, and multilateral approaches to global governance...[6]

*Webs of Interaction--Beyond Realism and Liberalism*

The complex nature of the world can be described using the spider web analogy: A spider spins its web to lure and entrap prey, establish territory, and nurture offspring. The spider is completely in charge of its web. Now imagine if our spider is forced to share its territory with a host of other spiders seeking space to spin their own individual webs. Assuming that all the spiders agree to share the space peacefully, the resulting conglomeration of webs would be exponentially more intricate and complex than the

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[5] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Erosion of American National Interests," Foreign Affairs 76, no. 3. (September/October 1997) 30.
[6] W. Andy Knight, "Engineering Space in Global Governance," in Future Multilateralism (New York: United Nations University Press, 1999) 258.

original web. It would be almost impossible for the spiders to negotiate their own web without coming in contact with another spider or encroaching on another spider's web. Relatively moderate disturbances in one part of the web are likely to reverberate throughout the web, perhaps even causing the entire structure to become untenable. Sooner or later, our spiders must learn to cooperate, collaborate, and coordinate with one another in order for the entire structure to survive.

Like a cluster of spider webs, the post-Cold War world is comprised of intricate webs of interaction in which a host of key actors--nation states, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, transstate entities--interact in physical abstract dimensions, in time and space, and with effects that are exponential not linear. In short, we are living in an increasingly interdependent world, in which, according to Keohane and Nye, "actors other than states participate directly in world politics, in which a clear hierarchy of issues does not exist, and in which force is an ineffective instrument of policy."[7]

As states experience declining capacities to manage and control the effects of the external environment, leaders will find it in their best interest to collaborate with both state and non-state entities in the pursuit of both national interests and international interests. W. Andy Knight notes the impact these trends are having on the nation-state:

> Because of globalization and the internationalization of the state, the very abstract and traditional Westphalian concept of sovereignty is under attack. No longer can we consider states as being billiard ball-type autonomous entities

[7] Keohane and Nye, 230.

which are impermeable to external forces and which can pursue their own self-defined national interests in an unimpeded fashion.[8]

The proliferation of global political actors is a major feature of the new world environment. Global actors include intergovernmental organizations (IGO), nongovernmental organizations (NGO), and non-state actors such as multinational corporations, financial institutions, and criminal organizations. The Union of International Associations, in its 1996/97 Yearbook of International Organizations, identifies more than 44,000 organizations of various types, 16,938 of which have membership in three or more countries and obtain financial support from sources in more than one country. More than one-third (about 16,600) of the 44,000 organizations are listed as inactive, dissolved, or apparently inactive, suggesting the dynamic nature of such organizations and the difficulty of building, resourcing and sustaining them.[9]

The growing influence of these organizations has made them major partners in setting the multinational agenda at major international conferences. At the 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development at Rio, some 1,400 NGO representatives were registered, and many were afforded official consultative status. The participation of NGOs at the Beijing Conference on Women was even more impressive, with more than 35,000 representatives taking part. NGOs have also played a significant role in helping the UN and other multilateral bodies cope with humanitarian crises from

[8] Knight, 267.
[9] "International Organizations by Type," in Yearbook of International Associations,1996/97 Edition, [book on-line] (Brussels, Belgium: Union of International Associations, accessed 20 September 1999); available from http://www.uia.org/uiastats/stybv196.htm.

Somalia, to Haiti, to Rwanda.[10] Similarly, large international organizations such as the World Bank now consult with the larger, well established NGOs, and large western donors now often prefer to fund NGOs in Africa, rather than local governments, to perform development and public works.[11] At the United Nations itself, some NGOs attract enormous respect through careful research, keen analysis and skillful lobbying. They also deliver valuable services and channel billions of dollars in development assistance, humanitarian aid and technical support to the world's poorest people, which according to the Global Policy Forum, was more than $8 billion in 1992, more than the entire UN system.[12]

Thus, the international system today is much more than a system of nation states. It is an ever-expanding network which cuts across the state system, causing competition among, and sometimes integration of, traditional national interests and today's complex global issues that can be termed "international interests." NGOs have been particularly effective in pushing human rights issues to the forefront of international politics. For example, over 350 NGOs were able to forge an efficient partnership between themselves and Canada to produce a treaty banning landmines, despite the opposition of the United States. This coalition, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, won the Nobel

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[10] Knight, 270-271.
[11] Saskia Sassen, "A new Geography of Power," from Global Policy Forum [on-line]; available from http://www.globalpolicy.org/nations/sassen.htm; Internet; accessed 20 September 1999.
[12] James A. Paul, "NGOs, Civil Society and Global Policy Making," from Global Policy Forum [on line]; available from http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/analysis.htm; accessed 20 September 1999.

Peace Prize for its efforts.[13] In security and peace making issues, NGOs have been helpful in keeping peace negotiations on track. The Burundi NGO networks that exist in Europe and the United States have been instrumental in keeping Burundi on the foreign affairs agenda, while in the country itself, NGOs are monitoring local peace initiatives, distributing humanitarian aid, and undertaking small-scale development projects.[14]

Finally, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is a good example of how nations will pursue economic and trade interests in Webs of Interaction. In an attempt to break Japanese dominance in Asian markets by opening those markets to western trade and investment, the United States has repeatedly sought to persuade the 18 APEC members to adopt its proposal to declare a Free Trade Zone by 2020 (APEC 2020). During the 1995 APEC meeting, U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry attempted to link U.S. military/security interests in the region to U.S. economic interests in an effort to convince the Asians that APEC 2020 is in their national and regional interests. So far, the Asian nations have resisted the U.S. efforts.[15]

## *The Nature of Power in Webs of Interaction*

[13] Ayna N. Humphrey, "NGOs and the State: An Evolving Relationship," (prepared for the U.S. Naval Academy Foreign Affairs Conference, 13-16 April 1999); available from http://www.nadn.navy.mil/nafac/delegates/papers/humphreys.htm; Internet; accessed 20 September 1999.
[14] Kumar Rupesinghe, "From Civil War to Civil Peace," in Future Multilateralism, (New York: United Nations University Press, 1999) 40.
[15] Walden Bello, "Growth, Crisis and Opportunity in East Asia, in Future Multilateralism, (New York: United Nations University Press, 1999) 237-238.

Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and its legitimization of the state system, sovereignty has been linked to the concept of state autonomy. Both realists and liberals take this as a given; autonomous states remain the basic units in the international system and vary only according to their power capabilities.[16] But in a framework of Webs of Interaction the nature and scope of power changes. Observers such as Burbach, Robinson, and Ake, see an erosion of state sovereignty in the wake of the increased influence of international organizations and other non-state entities. Other observers, such as Keohane and Nye, envision states proactively creating mechanisms and structures to adapt to the new power dynamics.

To adapt to an increasingly diverse international stage, states must learn to leverage the capabilities of international agencies, multinational corporations, and regional affiliations to take advantage of superior access to information, financial sources and human capital (personal influence, credibility, cultural ties). NGOs, in particular, offer a high degree of technical and regional expertise, a sense of shared values and belief in the social mission of the NGO, and flexible organizations that can be tailored to the particular task at hand. They can also assist states by shaping and marketing policy and by lobbying, persuading, and coordinating through worldwide networks. Transstate agencies, by virtue of their access and mobility, offer the capability to identify issues and challenges well before they achieve the status of "threats to national interests," and could

[16] Neuman, Stephanie G. "International Relations Theory and the Third World: An Oxymoron?," in International Relations Theory and the Third World, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) 7.

potentially serve as the state's eyes and ears, providing early warning and serving as the first line of defense. In terms of conflict prevention and resolution, transnational organizations could serve as a buffer between competing states and perhaps defuse conflicts over policy without compromising the interests of either party to a conflict.[17] Therefore it is in the state's interest to understand how these agencies work, establish cooperative relationships with them, and invest time and other assets in them for future payoff.

There are limits to the potential power of NGOs and other non-state actors, however. First, Western democracies increasingly recognize that NGOs are far more efficient than Third World governments and even traditional UN relief agencies in providing humanitarian and development support to the people. Thus, many states, including the United States and European nations through the European Union, opt to funnel vast aid donations directly through NGOs and often attempt to link political and social objectives to the NGO's charter. Second, as NGOs obtain increasingly vast sums of money form donor nations and business corporations, they become subject to close scrutiny and accounting, which in turn requires a degree of standardization, bureaucracy, and professionalism that could undermine the independence and autonomy that NGOs hold dear. NGOs could well find their political and social agenda, and thus their potential power, co-opted by nation-states. Third, many NGOs also face significant opposition from government officials of Third World and Developing nations, for

[17] Rupesinghe, 38-39.

example Kenya and Indonesia, who often perceive the NGO's efforts to organize the poor as potentially threatening to the regime's hegemony.[18]

By creating and conferring substantial authority on formal trade organizations such as GATT and WTO and international financial organizations such as the World Bank and IMF, states voluntarily diminish their own sovereignty, autonomy, and freedom to act in their individual interests in order to support the common international interests. Many of these efforts may generate policies, norms of behavior, and resource constraints that may force leaders to devote considerable time and resources in efforts to convince their own citizens that an internationally generated policy is in the national interest. At the extreme, observers such as Burbach and Robinson contend that current trends indicate that nation-state institutions could become *superseded* by transnational institutions altogether as international economic and political institutions assume more of the functions that earlier corresponded to a nation-state hegemon.[19]

Despite encroachments by intergovenmental, nongovernmental and transnational entities, states remain the predominant actors on the world stage, primarily because only states are capable of *mobilizing all facets of national power*--deciding when, where and how to employ resources--in advancing the national interests. Indeed, all of the impressive achievements of the international system, from the WTO, to the IMF, the

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[18] Ake, 190-192.

[19] Roger Burbach and William I. Robinson, "The Fin de Sicle Debate:Globalization as Epochal Shift," Science and Society, Vol.63, Spring 1999 (journal on-line); available from http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb; Internet; accessed 9 September 1999.

International Criminal Court, and the Treaty on Banning Landmines, rely on the will of governments for their continued success.

## *Strategic Implications*

World order is a process (means) not a result (end). The proliferation of IGOs, NGOs and other non-state actors signals a corresponding increase in the number of stakeholders operating on the world stage. American statecraft must recognize not only vital U.S. national interests but also "International Interests" such as economic prosperity, collective security, and environmental issues that all major states share in common. The determination of threats to national interests will be complicated by the interjection of international interests into the public discourse of the state. Threats may appear as conditions and issues in the environment and less attributable to the specific actions of opposing states. Soft power will become crucial in advancing the national interests. Military capability, while still the predominant expression of national power, will be useful primarily to enhance the credibility of a nation's soft power capabilities. As states develop and expand their webs of interaction, their economic, political, diplomatic, and security capabilities will be enhanced through cooperative ventures, partnerships, leveraging, networking, and coalitions to address specific issues.

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